

**ERICH FROMM**



**HUMAN NATURE AND  
SOCIAL THEORY**



**PRINCIPLES, PROPOSITIONS &  
DISCUSSIONS  
FOR LAND & FREEDOM**

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD TO THE  
'ANARCHIVE'

**"Anarchy is Order!"**

*I must Create a System or be enslav'd by  
another Man's.*

*I will not Reason & Compare: my business  
is to Create'*

(William Blake)

During the 19th century, anarchism has developed as a result of a social current which aims for freedom and happiness. A number of factors since World War I have made this movement, and its ideas, disappear little by little under the dust of history.

After the classical anarchism - of which the Spanish Revolution was one of the last representatives - a 'new' kind of resistance was founded in the sixties which claimed to be based (at least partly) on this anarchism. However this resistance is often limited to a few (and even then partly misunderstood) slogans such as 'Anarchy is order', 'Property is theft',...

Information about anarchism is often hard to come by, monopolised and intellectual; and therefore visibly disappearing. The 'anarchival' or 'anarchist archive' Anarchy is Order ( in short **A.O**) is an attempt to make the '**principles, propositions and discussions**' of this tradition available again for anyone it concerns. We believe that these texts are part of our own heritage. They don't belong to publishers, institutes or specialists.

These texts thus have to be available for all anarchists and other people interested. That is

one of the conditions to give anarchism a new impulse, to let the 'new anarchism' outgrow the slogans. This is what makes this project relevant for us: we must find our roots to be able to renew ourselves. We have to learn from the mistakes of our socialist past. History has shown that a large number of the anarchist ideas remain standing, even during the most recent social-economic developments.

**'Anarchy Is Order' does not make profits, everything is spread at the price of printing- and papercosts. This of course creates some limitations for these archives. Everyone is invited to spread along the information we give . This can be done by copying our leaflets, printing texts from the CD (collecting all available texts at a given moment) that is available or copying it, e-mailing the texts to friends and new ones to us,... Become your own anarchiv!!!**

(Be aware though of copyright restrictions. We also want to make sure that the anarchist or non-commercial printers, publishers and authors are not being harmed. Our priority on the other hand remains to spread the ideas, not the ownership of them.)

The anarchiv offers these texts hoping that values like **freedom, solidarity and direct action** get a new meaning and will be lived again; so that the struggle continues against the

*"...demons of flesh and blood, that sway  
scepters down here;  
and the dirty microbes that send us dark  
diseases and wish to  
squash us like horseflies;*

*and the will-'o-the-wisp of the saddest  
ignorance."*

(L-P. Boon)

The rest depends as much on you as it depends  
on us. Don't mourn, Organise!

Comments, questions, criticism, cooperation can  
be sent to [A.O@advalvas.be](mailto:A.O@advalvas.be).

A complete list and updates are available on this  
address, new texts are always

**welcome!!**

# **HUMAN NATURE AND SOCIAL THEORY**

## **A LETTER BY ERICH FROMM**

The following letter Erich Fromm wrote in 1969 to the Russian philosopher Vladimir Dobrenkov is a most impressive document of how deeply he was interested in getting contact with socialist thinkers and to discuss with them his reception of Marx and his understanding of socialism. Dobrenkov intended to write a book on Fromm and therefore started a correspondence with Fromm. Fromm tried to clarify many topics Dobrenkov misunderstood by presenting Fromm's ideas. But actually one cannot say that Fromm's clarifications showed much effect on Dobrenkov's book *Neo-Freudians in Search of Truth*, published in many languages in the seventies (Moskau: Progress Publishers). Nevertheless, this letter is a convincing summary of Fromm's concept of man and society and will be welcomed by all who are interested in Fromm's understanding of human nature as well as his social theory and his reception of Marx.

Cuernavaca (Mexico), 10th March, 1969

Dear Mr. Dobrenkov,

Many thanks for your letter which arrived a few days ago. I now want to answer this and your previous letter.

I was very happy to hear that you intend to write a monograph on my work, and to develop your own ideas and revisions. Naturally I am very glad to explain myself as best I can, and this I shall do now in my long-promised answer to your long letter. I have read it again very thoroughly and made a number of notes, but it covers so many points of theory that it would require a little book to answer adequately. So I can only try to answer the main points, hoping that where I am not clear or where you disagree you will write me again so that our dialogue can be continued, and possibly things can be cleared up still further. I am of course aware that it may not be possible to clear up everything as you or I would wish; you carry with you certain premises of your own thought and of your own tradition, just as I do, and there is always the question how far one can succeed in arriving at that complete objectivity which we both wish. But certainly one should make every attempt in this direction and not be too much disturbed whether one succeeds fully or not.

I am dictating this letter and it might not be entirely well organized. Sometimes I may jump from one point to another, but I am sure you will not mind that and will see the proper connections.

On the whole I think our discussion must cover several topics.

Your interpretation of my theory, in which I think are a number of misunderstandings which I shall try to clear up as far as possible.

My critique of certain of your Marxist premises.

As a result of number 1 and 2, as seen from my viewpoint, I believe my work to be closer to Marx's theory than you think, but that, of course, is something you will have to judge for yourself.

Eventually I shall answer your question about some of the empirical studies of a social-psychological nature that I have done.

1.

The most important misunderstanding seems to me to lie in a confusion between the human necessities which I consider part of human nature, and the human necessities as they appear as drives, needs, passions, etc., in any given historical period. This division is not very different from Marx's concept of »human nature in general«, to be distinguished from »human nature as modified in each historical period«. The same distinction exists in Marx when he distinguishes between »constant« or »fixed« drives and »relative« drives. The constant

drives »exist under all circumstances and ... can be changed by social conditions only as far as form and direction are concerned«. The relative drives »owe their origin only to a certain type of social organization«.

My own concept of the nature or essence of man is, as pointed out in *The Sane Society* and other writings, that it is characterized by two factors: instinctive determination has reached a minimum, and brain development an optimum. The change in quantity of both factors is transformed into a change in quality, and the particular contradiction between the lack of instinct and brain power is that point in animal evolution at which man qua man emerges as a new species. Man as man by virtue of this particular constellation is unique in animal development, and for the first time »life becomes aware of itself«. To define the essence of man in this way as an empirical set of contradictions is an evolutionary approach based on the natural factors of instinct and brain development. From there I take the second step: the contradiction inherent in man's existence requires a solution. Man could not live, act and remain sane, unless he can succeed in satisfying certain necessities which are the psychological concomitants of the biological essence of man. He needs to be related to other human beings. He needs to have a frame of orientation [and an object of devotion] which permits him to place himself at a certain point on an ordered picture of



the universe. He needs to have a character structure (in the dynamic sense) which is a substitute for instincts inasmuch as it permits him to act semi-automatically, without having to make a decision before every action, and to act consistently. These general human necessities constitute, in my view, human nature in its psychological aspect as a result of its biological contradiction.

This concept of human nature and its necessity does not imply which particular kind of frame of orientation (and, as I forgot to say above, of devotion) and which particular kind of character traits an individual or a group has. These are all created within the historical process, as adaptations to the particular social structure in which individuals live. One social structure will be conducive to cooperation and solidarity another social structure to competition, suspiciousness, avarice; another to child-like receptiveness, another to destructive aggressiveness. All empirical forms or human needs and drives have to be understood as results of the social practice (in the last analysis based on the productive forces, class structure, etc., etc.) but they all have to fulfill the functions which are inherent in man's nature in general, and that is to permit him to relate himself to others and share a common frame of reference, etc. The existential contradiction within man (to which I would now add also the contradiction between limitations which

reality imposes on his life, and the virtually limitless imagination which his brain permits him to follow) is what I believe to be one of the motives of psychological and social dynamics. Man can never stand still. He must find solutions to this contradiction, and ever better solutions to the extent to which reality enables him.

The question then arises whether there is an optimal solution which can be inferred from man's nature, and which constitutes a potential tendency in man. I believe that such optimal solutions can be inferred from the nature of man, and I have recently found it quite useful to think in terms of what in sociology and economy is now often called »system analysis«. One might start with the idea, in the first place, that human personality - just like society - is a system, that is to say, that each part depends on every other, and no part can be changed unless all or most other parts are also changed. A system is better than chaos. If a society system disintegrates or is destroyed by blows from the outside the society ends in chaos, and a completely new society is built upon its ruins, often using the elements of the destroyed system to build the new. That has happened many times in history. But, what also happens is that the society is not simply destroyed but that the system is changed, and a new system emerges which can be considered to be a transformation of the old one.

I believe that this was Marx's concept of socialism, as a systemic transformation of bourgeois society in such a way that the old system was »aufgehoben« in the Hegelian sense, but not destroyed. That is why Marx did not believe in the creative power of violence per se, but in violence acting as the midwife for the birth of a new system which was already prepared in the old system. I believe that Lenin's thinking was essentially the same.

To return to the main thought of this exposition, I want to stress that the optimal function of a system as a whole can be defined as the optimal functioning of all its parts and a minimum of energy-wasting friction between the various sectors of the system, and the system and other systems with which it is unavoidably in contact. On the other hand any system must prefer to sustain itself to chaos, that is to say, to its own disintegration. If we apply this to man, it would appear that »the fullest and harmonious development of all his faculties with a minimum of wasteful friction between the very sectors within man and between man and man« would be a general description of the aim of the full development of man. But to what extent this development can take place depends on historical factors, that is to say, on the social development and the possibility it offers, both in a stimulating or in a repressive sense, for the more or less progressive development of man's personality. To give

an example, if the economic and social conditions make slavery or serfdom a necessity, the slave class will acquire certain characteristics. Most of them will become submissive and a minority will become rebellious. The submissive ones may be useful for the work assigned to them by their masters. They may even love their masters but their submissiveness will stand in the way of the development of independence, freedom, love, responsibility, and productive thinking; in other words, they remain crippled men in the sense that the condition of submissiveness has the side effect of stultification and emotional and intellectual crippledness. When through social circumstances the slaves have possibilities not only for a Putsch but also for an independent form of existence, then indeed the most developed among them will become the leaders of a revolutionary movement, and their victory will change conditions in such a way that the human system operates in more mature and humanly richer conditions. At this point we enter into the concrete analysis of the psychic desires and needs which develop in certain classes as a response to the particular social circumstances and necessities which exist for that particular class.

Basically this relationship between the social process and individual psychic development were already described very clearly by Marx in the first volume of *Kapital*, pages 91-92 in

the Chicago edition (Charles H. Kerr, Co., 1906):

»Those ancient social organisms of production are, as compared with bourgeois society, extremely simple and transparent. But they are founded either on the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that united him with his fellow man in a primitive tribal community, or upon direct relations of subjection. They can arise and exist only when the development of the productive power of labor has not risen beyond a low state, and when, therefore, the social relations within the sphere of material life, between man and man, and between man and nature, are correspondingly narrow. This narrowness is reflected in the ancient worship of Nature, and in the other elements of popular religions. The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to nature. The life-process of material production does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan. This, however, demands for society a certain material groundwork or set of conditions of existence which in their turn are the spontaneous product of a long and painful process of development.«

I find that I have perhaps only re-stated my basic thesis, with which you are familiar, without pointing out sufficiently where I believe you misunderstand me. I have already said that one essential point of the misunderstanding seems to be a confusion between the necessities in the general sense of my model of human nature with its basic contradiction and the specific drives and necessities which follow as a solution to the general contradiction and which are socially conditioned. I have the impression that on the whole your own viewpoint as far as the relationship between human nature and society is concerned tends to make a too mechanical and nondialectic separation between the two, and that on the basis of such a separation you criticize me for separating the order of society from the order of social structure. When I say, as you quote, that human nature possesses its internal laws, and that the aim of development is based on these laws, and that the economic-social organization of society has its own, and that the one does not depend on the other, you may have quoted one sentence literally, but in fact too literally. I am not denying that in this one sentence I should have expressed myself more clearly, but if you compare this statement with the total position I take and have always taken, you will find precisely that I do not think that the social and psychological realm are relatively independent from each other. From my early

papers in Germany in 1932, of which I shall send you photostatic copies, to the present time, I have always had the concept of the social character, by which I mean that human energy is one of the raw materials which go into the social process, but that human energy enters into this process never in a general form, but in a specific form of character traits which are molded by the conditions of the economic and social structure of a given society.

I differ from the behaviorists and certain anthropologists in the sense that I believe that the basic condition of human nature in general, biologically as well as psychologically, permits only certain solutions in response to social situations, but not an unlimited number of solutions (I mean by this simply, that man can love or hate, of submit or dominate, but he cannot detach himself completely from all human beings unless he becomes insane, and that means unless his normal human functioning ceases completely or it means man can acquire and assimilate things by passive reception, by exploitation, by saving, or what I have called »marketing«, or by producing things, but as a human being he is forced to exchange with nature and this exchange can occur only within several possibilities.

I must also call your attention to the fact that it is crucial for my viewpoint that human behavior is to a large extent charged with a considerable amount of energy, but

that in contrast to Freud I do not consider this energy to be sexual, but the vital energy within any organism which, according to biological laws, gives man the desire to live, and that means to adapt himself to the social necessities of his society. To go back to what I consider to be the misunderstanding, it has never been my position that society only deforms or manifests that which is already there. If we make the distinction between human necessities in general and human desires in particular then indeed, society creates particular desires which, however, follow the general laws of the necessities rooted in human nature.

When you say that according to me the whole dynamism of the historical process reduces itself to the psychological conflict between the necessities of human nature and the possibilities of realizing them in a complete social structure, you over-simplify my position in a non-dialectical and abstract way. For instance, the productiveness of man is conceived by me as an inherent potentiality of man, just as destructiveness is itself developed by him in the historical process in which man creates himself. I would say that I follow completely Marx's evolutionary scheme in which he assumes that history is a sequence of development made possible by the development of the productive forces and of labor which leads through contradictions to ever higher forms of social structures, until by the activity of man, when certain socio-economic



conditions are given, man can reach a level of history in which history begins to be truly human history.

2.

The following are some remarks that are critical of your viewpoint as expressed by you and / or the kind of Marxist interpretation you present. Again I cannot write in a systematic manner, but I hope to make myself as clear as possible for the moment.

You write there is no nature of man, and that the essence can only be defined historically. This is not only in conflict with many statements made by Marx on the general and specific nature of man referred to above but what does it really mean? Is not what you say, very similar to pragmatic positivism, which would say that man's changes occur continuously in the historical process, and that man's only essence is the fact that he changes with the historical process? When you say a sentence later, »therefore the realization of the potential in man coincides always with the change in reality« it is something which I have said myself many times. You then say »the psychological necessities are not only present in man since his birth, but they are formed in the processes of the activity of man which are directed toward the change of the historical conditions of his existence.« Basically this is also not different from my

own point of view; however, you would have to clarify what you mean by man's tendencies to change the historical conditions.

The victory of Nazism in Germany was to a large extent due to the destructive, authoritarian, sadistic character structure of the lower middle class, which in itself was a result of their own position in the society (they were losing all their social function, and were actually decaying as a class). They were not tending to improve society, but they were driven to the gamble of choosing between total supremacy or self-destruction. This is always true, of course, for all conservative and reactionary classes.

Take the American worker: he is one of the most conservative or even reactionary elements in American society, and only in a most limited sense does he tend to improve the social conditions. In many ways he tends to stop progress. He is motivated in this by many factors. Perhaps the most important one is that because of increasing automatization he feels basically threatened in his whole existence - at least in the long run - and in fact, the further technological society goes, the more a large part of the work of the working class will become obsolete. He is threatened by the demands of the negroes (or, as they now want to be called, the »blacks«) to advance in their social position, and aside from that, while he is the best-paid worker in the world, his appetite for maximal consumption is so

stimulated by advertising that - paradoxically enough -while earning many times more than the European worker earns, he is in fact very dis-satisfied and frustrated, because he cannot buy all that industry tells him he ought to have. Again these are psychological factors in the worker produced by his class situation which, however, in their turn make him reactionary and not disposed to further progress. I shall go back to this point later.

I want to add here the question what you really mean when you say »for man the concretely historical world which surrounds him represents the contents of his essence and the limits of his possibilities«. Is that not again basically the behavioristic view-point the philosophers of the French enlightenment had who believed that everything in man is due to nothing but his environmental influences, and who went so far in denying anything »essential« in man that they even denied that there is any difference between men and women (aside from the obvious anatomical differences) which is not attributable to environment (l'âme n'a pas de sexe).

You write that the problem of human existence is nothing else but the problem of the realization of man's necessities and concretely historical interests. This statement again sounds to me too abstract. Which are the necessities and concretely historical interests of man which constitute the problem of human existence? If you

would say that he has to eat, to drink, sleep, produce materials for shelter and clothing, tools and weapons, to protect his young, and his access to females, then this is of course a perfectly correct statement. But in speaking about these necessities we speak about the basic necessities of biological survival. But what are the interests beyond that which constitutes the problem of human existence? Is there an inherent human interest to be free, even in a society where this is not a concrete historical possibility like, let us say, ancient Greek society? Is this need to be free not rooted in the constitution of man, but it remains unconscious because his frame of orientation given by his society does not enable him even to be aware of the vision of freedom which you might say is potential in the human organism, as in fact it is also in the animal organism? (Of course the animal is not conscious of it, but shows by his behavior that captivity harms it, makes it more aggressive, even prevents it from producing offspring, while the optimal fulfillment of its own nature lies precisely in the condition of freedom.)

You write that it seems that a criterion for being objective must be to be outside of one's society and, in general, outside of history; and that in order to evaluate history I discover a special super-historic sphere of human insights. Please consider this: the revolutionary and critical thinker is in a certain way always outside of his society while of course he is at the same time also in

it. That he is in it is obvious, but why is he outside it? First, because he is not brainwashed by the ruling ideology, that is to say, he has an extraordinary kind of independence of thought and feeling; hence he can have a greater objectivity than the average person has. There are many emotional factors too. And certainly I do not mean to enter here into the complex problem of the revolutionary thinker. But it seems to me essential that in a certain sense he transcends his society. You may say he transcends it because of the new historical developments and possibilities he is aware of, while the majority still think in traditional terms. That is undoubtedly true.

But what about the utopian thinkers of all ages, from the Prophets who had a vision of eternal peace, on through the Utopians of the Renaissance, etc.? Were they just dreamers? Or were they so deeply aware of new possibilities, of the changeability of social conditions, that they could visualize an entirely new form of social existence even though these new forms, as such, were not even potentially given in their own society? It is true that Marx wrote a great deal against utopian socialism, and so the term has a bad odor for many Marxists. But he is polemical against certain socialist schools which were, indeed, inferior to his system because of their lack of realism. In fact, I would say the less realistic basis for a vision of the uncrippled man and of a free society there is, the more is Utopia the only

legitimate form of expressing hope. But they are not trans-historical as, for instance, is the Christian idea of the Last Judgment, etc. They are historical, but the product of rational imagination, rooted in an experience of what man is capable of and in a clear insight into the transitory character of previous and existing society.

I don't really mean to discuss here the problem of utopianism, which is such a crucial topic in the socialist discussion. I only mean to point out that one does not have to take a super-historical viewpoint in order to have an objective criterion of the good society. But at the same time don't forget that inasmuch as my concept of the human essence is concerned, it is not more »outside of society« than a statement about neurological processes in man, or any other basic factor of his constitution.

Man emerges, and I repeat myself, at a certain point from animal development in a very specific way. You might say at a point where »evolution« in the biological sense ends, »history« begins; but the evolutionary standpoint itself is in a larger sense a historical standpoint, and to define man in terms of that essence which I have written about is by no means an abstraction or something outside of history. The animal »man« is historically given, and the question is only whether we take as given only his neurophysiological apparatus or whether we specify this given more in terms of the

contradictions and the psychological results I have indicated.

I come now more closely to what you call the Marxist thesis, namely that the evaluations one can make of the historical development are not determined in accordance with a theoretical, freely chosen point of view, but with the laws, the logic and the very essence of the social process, and that with this logic, the historical necessity can be evaluated as progressive and development thanks to the fact that its results coincide with the necessities of man. The reason for this conformity of the coincidence of historical necessity and the concrete coincidence of historical necessity and the concrete necessities of man is to be found in the active historical essence of man. Man being a product of social relations is at the same time a subject of historical activity.

I hope you will not mind if I express myself very critically about this point of view. And I am sure I do not have to say at this point that my criticism is, to the best of my knowledge, based on the results of my thinking and not on an emotional bias. It seems to me that this statement is basically abstract, empty and formalistic. You say the historical criteria are the laws, the logic and the very essence of the social process. I assume by that you mean that the criterion of social progress is that new social forms, new forms of production are found which are better adapted to the new productive forces. This is, of course, a basic Marxist

concept and as far as it goes it is in my opinion correct. But at the same time a problem becomes apparent here.

Let us say, for instance, that corporate capitalism could prove that it is more adapted to the new productive forces than the socialist system is. That, in fact, it is not as in the Marxian model a hindrance to the productive forces, but that it furthered them. Then what is the criterion for progress? You can, of course, decline to enter into this argument by saying that in the long run at least, capitalism can manage the new productive forces less well than socialism can. This may be so, but it is an awfully speculative argument. Marx quite obviously did not foresee that capitalism itself, in its further progress, could change its structure to the extent to which it has changed, and it seems to me rather dogmatic to say at this point that capitalist forms, as they might still further develop, would still hinder the full unfolding of the full productive forces. I am not denying that this could be so. I am only saying this is highly speculative, and a rather uncertain basis for a criterion. What we can say is that capitalism in its present form of a bureaucratized, centralized industrial system tends to make man more alienated, to cripple him, and not only the worker but the whole population. But as soon as I use this criterion as a basis for the criticism of capitalism I am no longer using the immanent criterion of the historical process. In other



words, the development of man himself is a very essential criterion for what is historical progress.

But what is your criterion for the progress of man? I do not want to enter into any polemics with many concepts of the »new man« with which I am familiar from the Soviet discussion, but it seems to me quite questionable whether the method of fast and drastic industrialization and many other things that follow from this actually have led to the creation of a new man. I see many features of the old Victorian man, blended with certain features of the New American man, and I would find it very difficult to evaluate the social system from the immanent standpoint of the growth of its own economic potential. (But we really don't have to argue about the possibilities of the capitalist system which, as you know, I consider to be extremely harmful and dangerous to man.)

We may even visualize a world which has made use of all productive forces, and hence has led to immense material wealth and to an ever-increasing consumption (and, if you like, we could say that such maximal development may only take place in a socialist country), but then I would ask what is the criterion to decide whether that is a progressive system? Maybe, as I believe, the total consumer becomes extremely passive, alienated, a cog in the machine, in spite of the fact that from a standpoint of immanent historical development all obstacles to the

fullest use of the existing productive forces have been done away with. I find that with the formula you mention one remains very much outside of the concrete analysis of a new society and what happens to man in it, but one gets caught in a kind of circular reasoning in which one speaks of man's necessities which are produced by the society, so that there is no criterion to judge these necessities.

After all, there are healthy needs and unhealthy needs which cannot be judged from a purely economic standpoint. One needs to have a picture of man, of his possibilities for better or worse, and this picture - and this is what I tried to say in the previous part - is not an abstract one outside of history, but it is the result of the observation of man within the historical process, starting out with his role at the moment when he emerges from animal evolution.

My main point is the need for constant interpenetration of economic, social and psychological factors. By that I do not mean that one cannot analyze the society without the psychological factor. If that were so, Marx's theory would lack scientific basis, since the psychological factors were contained in it only occasionally and implicitly. Of course one can understand class struggle, interests of the dominant classes, revolutionary development, etc., etc., without any psychological considerations. The theory of Überbau

[superstructure] and Unterbau [basis] is basically correct. I believe my contribution to the development of Marxism has been the attempt to answer the question Engels himself raised, and that is that they did not study in detail how this connection between Überbau and Unterbau occurs. What I am trying to show is that to make this analysis complete one has to consider the psychological needs which are produced by the social organization (as for instance Marx said, Habsucht [avarice] is a passion produced by capitalist society), and as I tried to say before, that while these psychological needs are a response to the social situation and its necessities, they are in themselves alternatives based on the biological existence of man and certain general psychological necessities which, however, are not identical with the specific necessities which develop in adaptation to social structures.

### 3.

I have almost covered point 3 concerning my own views. I should just like to formulate this: the main problem, as I see it, is how human energy is channelled and used by every given society for its own purposes, and how in turn the human needs thus produced have an influence on social development; sometimes a revolutionary one but very often a reactionary one, because the character structure as it has been formed in

the past by tradition, culture, teaching, family, etc., changes more slowly than the socioeconomic factors. Indeed, the slowness of the historical processes is to a large extent to be explained by the fact of this lag, that is to say, by the fact that man psychologically lives several generations behind the new economic and technical possibilities. If that were not so, the birth of a new society would not be as painful and difficult as it is. I don't need to say more about my own work, since in the pages in which you write about those aspects in which you agree with my views, you show that there is no need for any further explanation or comment from my side. Our difficulty lies really in the fact that you accept one part of my work and reject a great deal of its theoretical foundation, and the purpose of all that I have written in this letter was to try to show that you misunderstand certain of my premises, and that this misunderstanding is connected with your own theoretical Marxist thought.

#### 4.

You ask me about any concrete studies which I have done in the field of social character. I want to mention a few. First, a study done at the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1931, on the authoritarian versus the revolutionary character. The purpose of the study was to try to find out how the workers

and employees would react to Hitler, if and when he came to power. Opinionwise they were all 100% against Nazism, but we were convinced that it depended on the relative strength of authoritarian versus anti-authoritarian forces in their character structure whether they would fight against Hitler, whether they would become Nazis once Hitler had won, or whether they would become neither ardent fighters against nor ardent admirers of Hitler. We were able to predict almost accurately the percentage of people who would choose one of these three ways (as it turned out to be later) by analyzing the character structure of this group.

The means we used to find out the character structure was the »interpretative questionnaire', in which we did not take the answers at face value, as given, but interpreted their unintended meaning from the specific formulation of the answer, which was taken down by the interviewer textually. Such an interpretation is not too different from the interpretation of statements in a psychoanalytic interview, in which very small details are indicative of the character structure; if you have 100 questions or so, then the consistency in the pattern that emerges in the replies shows that one does not deal with an accidental or arbitrary interpretation of just one statement. I shall send you later a more detailed report on this study. The questionnaire we used was actually published in the volume *Autorität*

und Familie, published by Alcan, Paris, in 1936, and which contained in fact many important materials on the problem of Autorität und Familie. This volume of almost 1000 pages is out of print, and I doubt whether the library in Moscow would have it, but nevertheless it is possible.<sup>1</sup>

A similar study, using the same questionnaire method but in a more elaborate and refined way, was done with the assistance of a number of people, especially a former student of mine, Dr. M. Maccoby, in a small village in Mexico of 900 inhabitants. This study took over 10 years, and the results will be published by the end of this year or the beginning of next under the title Class and Character in a Small Mexican Village.<sup>2</sup> We show the inter-connection between the character of the peasant and his mode of production, and can explain with this method even specific details such as, for instance, the reasons for cultivating sugar cane as against rice or even more profitable crops like tomatoes, etc. Naturally I shall be happy to send you the book when it is published.

Incidentally, the book on Authoritarian Character by Adorno was a continuation of our earlier work on the authoritarian character. Adorno was a member of the same Institute, in Frankfurt, and he used in one way a very elaborate method, but he lost a good deal of my original method due to his lack of psychoanalytic knowledge. For personal reasons he hardly mentioned our

earlier study which was not published. The reasons for that are too complicated to explain; I might only say it was one of the factors which made me separate from the Institute of Social Research in 1939.

Eventually I want to mention a study on political characterology which Dr. Maccoby undertook recently, in which he studied the difference between life-centered and anti-life centered personalities among American voters (the study was made before the last elections in the United States). In this study he used a questionnaire which did not need interpretation, but in which the questions were formulated in such a way from a theoretical standpoint that the »yes« and »no« answers had an immediate psychological meaning which, however, was not obvious to those who responded. (I am sending you a copy of this study).<sup>3</sup>

I have found that this method of either the interpretative questionnaire, or that with theoretically loaded questions, is exceedingly helpful in socio-psychological research, going beyond the purely behavioral description and aiming at a deeper and often unconscious motives. The present opinion polls and behavioral studies only show what a person is thinking today, while we know that most people follow the pattern of social thought, and what matters is the dominant elements in their character structure which are responsible for their way of acting tomorrow, provided the circumstances allow them. And what matters

for social prediction or even analysis is not just opinion but conviction; that is to say, opinion rooted in the total personality structure.

I am very happy to send you most of the books you asked me for, and have at the moment only omitted those which to me sound little promising. I have written to a book store to send you these books. It will, of course, take a good deal of time until they arrive, but I hope they will arrive safely.

I have now written quite a few pages, and am not satisfied that I made my points clear enough. Of course my main purpose was to clarify my own position, and in doing so I have to be critical of some of your positions. I can only hope that you will receive my letter in the spirit in which it is written and, in fact, I have no doubt that you will. I am somewhat comforted about the inadequacy of this letter by the hope that in whatever you feel I was not clear enough, or where you disagree, you will give me the privilege of reading your objections and trying again to explain. Eventually, as I wrote before, we may not arrive at the same opinion, but we may at least both try our best to understand each other as much as possible, I believe that the introduction of psychological principles would add to Marx's theory, and that there is an immense field which has to be covered, both theoretically and empirically. I am very happy that you are trying to do this.



I am, with warmest wishes,

Yours:

Erich Fromm

P.S. The translation from the Russian is not quite as simple as you think. I have here in Mexico a professional Russian translator, who translated your letters into Spanish but since he is not familiar with the subject matter, his translation is not always the very best. I could send your letters to a close friend in New York who is a psychoanalyst and speaks Russian perfectly well, but since she is rather slow it would take four weeks or more to get the translation. On the other hand I imagine it is difficult for you to write in English, and also to find somebody who could translate your letter into English, aside from the fact that if it is not really a good translation, it is often difficult to understand the meaning. I know that from experience with many different translations I have received, some of which were supposed to be correct, but I could not understand them at all. So maybe the best way is, after all, if you continue to write in Russian and that we simply figure that it will take some weeks until I get the proper translation.

#### Annotations

1) In the meantime Fromm's investigation of the thirties is published: *The Working Class in Weimar Germany. A Psychological and*

Sociological Study, edited and introduced by Wolfgang Bonss, London: Berg Publishers, 1984.

2) Actually this study was published in 1970 under the title: Social Character in a Mexican Village. A Socio-psychoanalytic Study, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970.

3) For more information contact Michael Maccoby by his e-mail address: michael@maccoby.com, or write to The Project on Technology, Work and Character, 1700 K Street, NW, Suite 306, Washington, DC 20009, USA.

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